

**“The Nature of the Book” Essay**

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In his *The Nature of the Book*, Johns (1998) views a printed book as “both the product of one complex set of social and technological processes and also the starting point for another” (p. 3). This philosophical statement is worth further exploring as it appears there is a lot of context within this short phrase. To explore the meaning of this statement, the essay will review social and technological aspects of a book’s composition, how one book is the starting point for another one; it will also explore whether other published resources may also have complex compositions.

#### **Social Composition of a Printed Book**

A book is written by one or a group of authors, but similarly to an old African saying “it takes a village,” it requires an army of people and technologies to create a printed book. All those involved need to coordinate their efforts in order for a draft manuscript, after it is reviewed, copy edited, edited, decided on page layout and styles, text put onto pages, and printed, to become a final version of a book. The team of people responsible for the final product all need to agree on the process moving forward. They all need to “act together for it to become into existence” (Johns, 1998, p. 3). Many of these team members (e.g., editors, copy writers, etc.) by correcting the text flow or style add their own thoughts to a book. As McKemmish (2005) noted, when a thought is added, it “leave[s] a trace which becomes independent of its origin” (p. 1). Such a team of people create a “print culture in making” (Johns, 1998, p. 2). This brings up a question about the true authorship of a book. According to Geary (2010), the single authorship question is not new and goes all the way back to the authorship of medieval manuscripts that were written before 1100 (p. 108). In some instances, the required correction of a draft book version is so extensive, it may affect the originally intended context. Or, like in case of Shakespeare’s play scripts, may not even have two identical versions due to constant corrections

introduced by others and Shakespeare himself (Geary, 2010; Kastan, 2001). All these contributing social factors combined suggest the final book product is a complex one and thus may be in fact be seen as multi-authored.

### **Technological Composition of a Printed Book**

In addition to social factors, scientific and technological factors also add complexity to a final book product. Over the past several centuries, we have seen a rapid evolution of printing tools from a paper-making machine in 11th century, first print press in mid-1400s, and first recorded sound and photographic technologies in 18th and early 20th centuries, to highly sophisticated computer-based software and platforms for print and digital publications, sound recordings, and movie making. In fact, Alexander (2021b, c) suggests that a book is a “commodity” and “technology” (2021b). Thus, any printed book also includes all previously made advances in the book printing technology (e.g., ink, paper printing machines, digital printing equipment, etc.).

### **A Book as the New Beginning**

The world does not stop during the development of a final book product. Technology and science continuous advances as well as changing society’s social, economic, and political views contribute new evidence resulting in the next published product being different from the previous one. For example, a book may be first published as a hardcover paper version and later it may be released in other formats such as paperback, audio, or e-book. Thus, a book format version that is released first becomes the starting point for other formats of the same book.

In addition to various book format types, the text version of a book may also change. While Shakespeare’s example of constantly changing play script versions is an extreme one (Geary, 2010; Kastan, 2001), we observe a book’s version changing in today’s world as well. For

example, the last edition of a textbook may vary significantly from its first edition. Due to rapid changes in society and science, author(s) start making corrections to a textbook often as soon as a previous edition is out of print. Therefore, such a printed book becomes the starting point for the next often improved version of it.

### **Other Published Resources as a Complex Set of Processes**

The recognition of a book product as a complex set of processes extends far beyond a book product. In fact, I would say this concept is applicable to not only all printed but include all published (print and digital) resources such as newspapers, magazines, recorded music tunes, motion picture films, etc.

Written original manuscripts and photographs, though complex, are not the same as printed books. While an original painting, for example, exists as one copy confined in a single physical space, a book exists in many versions and it is “everywhere” (Alexander, 2021b). Manuscripts were “based on variation” and copiers added their own “traces” to exemplars (2021b), thus making versions of the same product different from one another.

In summary, Johns (1998) in his book *The Nature of the Book* described a book as a complex product that is closely related to advances made in human knowledge, technologies, as well as people’s social acceptance and understanding of the world. Such a product requires a team of people getting together to achieve a common goal-to produce a book. Such a final book becomes the starting point of a new product, either as an improved version of the same type or used by others to create a completely new product, both resulting in continuous progress and further democratization of the society.

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